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WILDLIFE SERVICES—FLORIDA

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USDA Resolves Wildlife Conflicts in Florida

Every day, residents, industries, organizations and agencies call on Florida Wildlife Services (WS) for help in protecting agriculture, human health and safety, natural resources, and property from damage or threats posed by wildlife. WS' professional wildlife biologists respond to these requests with effective, selective, and humane strategies to resolve wildlife conflicts.

WS works to protect property and reduce human health and safety risks at airports, schools, and along roadways. The program also protects people, pets, and livestock from wildlife-borne diseases; guards many natural resources, such as fisheries and timber, from wildlife depredation; and educates the public about wildlife and wildlife damage management. Specific projects conducted by Florida WS include, protecting endangered piping plovers, leatherback sea turtles, and green sea turtles from predation; conducting sampling and monitoring for West Nile virus and rabies; and managing damage caused by feral hogs, beavers, pigeons, vultures, and other wildlife.

Applying Science & Expertise to Wildlife Challenges

WS offers information, advice, equipment, and materials that enable many people to resolve wildlife conflicts on their own. Often, this technical assistance can be provided over the phone. WS also provides on-site expertise, or direct assistance to manage complex wildlife problems that cannot be safely resolved by others. To support this effort, WS conducts scientific research across the Nation to develop answers to new problems posed by wildlife and to ensure the program benefits from the latest science and technology. WS has cooperated with the National Wildlife Research Center, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to publish 38 scientific articles in peer reviewed journals.

Aquaculture Assistance—Florida is home to the largest tropical fish industry in the world and it has a relatively large and growing foodfish (i.e. catfish, tilapia and shrimp) and baitfish industry. Wildlife Services has two biologists in Florida trained in protecting fish crops from bird and mammal predators. These biologists provide direct assistance and technical assistance to fish farmers.

Top 5 Major Assistance Activities:

- Protecting endangered and threatened plant and animal species from predation
- Protecting civil and military aviation from wildlife strikes
- Managing damage caused by vultures, feral hogs, beavers, and coyotes
- Controlling invasive species such as the African pouch rat, and feral monkeys
- Protecting aquaculture from bird depredation

Top 5 WS Research Projects of Interest to Florida:

- Improving surveillance and monitoring techniques
- Managing wildlife transmission of rabies
- Defining and reducing wildlife hazards to aviation
- Improving management techniques for reducing bird predation to aquaculture
- Identifying and refining methods to control predators of endangered and threatened species



Protecting Agricultural Crops—Wildlife Services assists farmers with protecting their crops from wildlife. Technical assistance and recommendations for permits to take birds and predating mammals be provided to farmers experiencing problems.

Protecting Livestock—Ranchers are given assistance with controlling coyotes and black vultures that are predating on livestock. Wildlife Services has one full time professional trapper that controls coyotes in Columbia County to protect calves. Additionally, ranchers are given hands on advice, and assisted with obtaining permits to control black vultures that are killing newborn calves.

Protecting Human Health and Safety at Airports—With more than 100 airports, Florida is second only to California in reported wildlife collisions with aircraft. According to the latest Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) report, 3,622 bird strikes were reported by Florida airports from 1990 to 2003.

WS is recognized nationally and internationally for its scientific expertise in reducing wildlife hazards to the aviation industry. WS' National Wildlife Research Center (NWRC), conducts research to understand the nature of wildlife hazards at airports, develops management tools to reduce these hazards, and provides airport personnel with information to manage hazards.

Applying this scientific expertise, WS provided direct assistance to 11 Florida airports and technical assistance to 23 airports in fiscal year (FY) 2004. Technical assistance included assisting with wildlife hazard assessments and management plans, and training airport personnel to reduce the risk of wildlife collisions with aircraft. Direct assistance included removing wildlife habitat from airfields and directly controlling wildlife that were threats to air craft.

Protecting Human Health and Safety from Rabies—WS in collaboration with the Florida Department of Agriculture and county agencies distrib-

uted 650,000 oral rabies vaccination baits throughout a designated area in Pinellas, Hillsborough, Polk, Pasco, Lake, Sumter and Hernando counties to vaccinate raccoons against rabies.

Protecting Health and Safety in the Workplace—WS has removed large concentrations of birds, mainly pigeons and vultures, from roosting areas in power plants, transmission towers and railway yards where their feces and filth were creating hazardous working conditions for employees.

Protecting 47 Endangered and Threatened Species—WS protects threatened and endangered species from wildlife predation and damage. WS protects 47 threatened and endangered species in Florida including five species of sea turtles, eight species of endangered rodents, and six bird species.

Protecting Natural Areas from Destruction by Feral and Wild Hogs—Feral hog damage to dwindling ecosystems that are important to Florida was reduced by a documented \$4 million in Savannas Preserve State Park alone through hog management by WS. WS also conducts feral hog damage control to protect important ecosystems at five additional State parks, Palm Beach County, St. John's River and Northwest Florida Water Management Districts, and on Eglin Air Force Base.

Protecting Florida from Invasive Species—WS has eliminated a wild population of black-tailed jackrabbits from the airfield at Miami International Airport. The jackrabbits, not endemic to Florida, had escaped from a cargo shipment and established themselves at the airport. At the request of Miami International Airport, WS removed 187 rabbits. No rabbits have been reported on the airfield, and it is assumed that all were eradicated.

WS is currently working on eliminating a population of Gambian pouch rats from Grassy Key.

Addressing Residential Property Damage Caused by Black and Turkey Vultures—Black and turkey vultures cause extensive damage to homes, watercraft, and other equipment by chewing and ripping up roof shingles, caulking, boat and seat covers and cushions, insulation and other soft, pliable material. Working with the National Wildlife Research Center, Wildlife Services has developed ways for Floridians to protect their property from damage by vultures. Vulture effigies were found to work well at deterring other vultures from a location.

Preventing Damage to Transmission Towers from Damage Caused by Black and Turkey Vultures—Vulture effigies developed by the National Wildlife Research Center field station in Gainesville are being used extensively by WS to deter vultures from transmission towers.

Protecting Multiple Resources from Feral Hog Damage—Protecting threatened and endangered species, natural wetlands, public and private property, and humans and livestock from diseases through feral hog damage management is a major consideration for WS in Florida. Feral hogs were introduced into Florida during the advent of European settlements. At the time, they were considered an extremely important part of the food resources; however, in recent years, feral hog numbers have increased dramatically. Feral hogs have no significant natural predators, and hog hunting by man does not keep the population in check. Feral hogs are now found in nearly all areas of the State, and Statewide population estimates indicate that their numbers continue to increase. While this population escalation has resulted in some benefits derived from recreational hunting, the detrimental impacts from feral hog activities have also increased. From 2000 to 2004, WS received requests for direct assistance with feral hog damage problems from Palm Beach County, the Florida DEP (Seven State Parks), St. John's

Major Cooperators:

- Eglin Air Force Base
- Homestead Air Reserve Base
- Florida Department of Natural Resources
- US Fish and Wildlife Service
- St. John's River Water Management District
- Northwest Florida Water Management District
- Columbia County
- Palm Beach County

River and Northwest Florida Water Management Districts, and Eglin AFB. Typical requests for assistance involved damage to sensitive wetlands, forest resources and croplands, destruction of threatened and endangered plants, erosion and siltation of streams and ponds, and the threat of disease transmission to humans and other animals.

To address some of these problems, funded programs were established to hire five WS professionals to trap and remove feral hogs. The program is run by WS through cooperative service agreements with Palm Beach County, the Florida DEP, St. John's River and Northwest Florida Water Management District's, and Eglin AFB.

Looking to the Future

In Florida public safety is a concern for wildlife managers. This is particularly true at airports. Additional attention must be given to this very specialized area of work.

Cormorants and other water birds are a constant threat to aquaculture producers in Florida. Additional resources are needed to meet the expanding needs to help resolve these problems.

Expanding feral hog populations are becoming more of an issue in Florida. As natural areas become more scarce due to development, it becomes more important that they be protected from feral hog damage.

The State also has a need to manage the transmission and spread of raccoon rabies. Florida WS is currently participating in our national effort to prevent the westward spread of raccoon rabies, and, hopefully, to eliminate rabies from the United States.

Florida Wildlife Services Funding

In addition to receiving federally allocated funds, WS also receives money from cooperators; such as producers; private individuals; businesses; and other Federal, State, and Local government agencies who have a vested interest in the program. These cooperators have a role in wildlife damage management, because in most cases they need help to resolve wildlife damage problems or conflicts.

